Note by LMB: This interview was done for Jo's column at www.tor.com–inspired by fascinating series of reviews she had just posted of the Vorkosigan saga as read in publication order. It first appeared April 20, 2009.

http://www.tor.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=blog&id=23438

Lois McMaster Bujold
Interviewed by Jo Walton, April 2009

Jo: You wrote the beginning of the series really seriously out of chronological order. Why did you do that?

LMB: Random chance, mostly. The first three books were written on spec, without assurance that all or even any would ever sell, or in what combinations. *Shards of Honor* was simply a first novel, with no certainty of even reaching its own end (which, indeed, it overshot in its first draft, up to what is now Chapter 8 or so of *Barrayar*.) *The Warrior's Apprentice* flowed directly from *Shards*–the first scene to bloom in my head, which the book was eventually written to reach (much mutated by then), was the death of Bothari, defending Miles. Then I went back and found the beginning, and the rest is history.

Because nothing had sold by the time I finished *WA*, *Ethan of Athos* was written to stand alone (yet be optionally part of the future history/series), and to be short, because the current cargo-cult rumor amongst the wanna-be-published back then was that editors would be more likely to read a short manuscript out of their slush piles first.

Falling Free started with the idea of Arde Mayhew, the obsolete jump pilot from *WA*, going off to find an RG ship at some interstellar junk dealers who were themselves obsolete bioengineering. It became *FF* via a couple of phone conversations with Jim Baen, in which he more or less encouraged me to forget Arde and concentrate on the quaddies, and I again reasoned my way back to their beginnings to start. (I wanted to be sure if I wrote something, it would be something Jim wanted to buy. This issue was of somewhat less concern a decade later.) *FF* kinda wanted to be a trilogy (following some sort of "escape from Pharaoh–40 years in the wilderness–arrival at Canaan" template), but I got distracted, plus I didn't *want* to spend 40 years in the wilderness. *Brothers in Arms*, the next to be written (after the novella "Borders of Infinity" which was written during a break in the first third of *FF*) started with a piece of music that triggered a mental picture of a rather cocky Miles, and some Dendarii, that somehow

became the opening set-up of the book. I'm not sure I'd even thought of Mark at the time I began the opening chapters.

The Vor Game, next, therefore was a prequel, written to answer the question, "So, just how *did* Miles get from the end of *WA*, where we left him at the space academy, to the position of the seasoned mercenary commander we just saw in the last two tales?"

And *Barrayar* (another prequel) was written to recycle the cut-off end of the original *Shards*, because I was desperately broke and looking to fake some speed of production.

No grand plans, I'm afraid, although I did make some joking remark to Jim Baen about "a Miles decology" at one point (over breakfast at WorldCon 1986, iirc.) Then I broke off to write *The Spirit Ring*, something completely different. For a while, it wanted to spawn a sequel set in Venice, but that idea died.

I had the notion for something my three pages of penciled notes called "Simon Illyan's memory chip goes glitchy," which involved Miles, still firmly in the Dendarii, escorting the chip-damaged Illyan to Illyrica for repairs. But in plot-noodling with my friend Pat Wrede, who had listened to me complaining about the constraints of prequels a couple of times by now, she strongly suggested that if I were going to do something more with Mark and have it matter, it needed to be next. So then I started on *Mirror Dance*, with the earliest notions for *Memory* already in mind. By the time I arrived back at them, everything was changed, especially me; for one thing, I'd gone from 20-years-married to thankfully divorced in the interim. Big, big identity change there. *Cetaganda* was vamping, while things settled down and I got a grip on the next phase of my life.

It all looks inevitable only in retrospect.

Jo: How much did you know about the books you hadn't written yet?

LMB: Rags and snatches, many of which turned out to be incomplete or just plain wrong by the time I arrived somewhere completely else, dumped out unceremoniously at some unexpected destination by the book just completed.

The books first turn up as fragmentary pictures in my head, usually, disconnected scenes that I then have to explain to myself, and eventually the reader. They don't turn up all at once, of course, or my head would explode; just the opening, and a notion of the direction or ending (sometimes). Finer-grained visions turn up en route, stirred up by the writing itself, which would not come if I just sat down and waited for them. Some of the early discards were quite elaborate scenarios. (For example, the Miles-becomes-emperor one, ending in his assassination… not gonna happen. An early and dreadful romance notion, and so on.) Sometimes it's just an evocative, free-floating

phrase, like, "Miles and Ivan attend the Cetagandan state funeral." Sometimes a picture sits around in my head for years, nearly forgotten, and suddenly attaches to a work in progress or in embryo. Part of the opening scene of the current work is one of those. Its setting is another.

If I knew how the books were going to end before embarking on them, there would be little reason to write them, after all. Dag says it best, in *Passage*: "The most important thing about quests, he decided, was not in finding what you went looking for, but in finding what you never could have imagined before you ventured forth."

Jo: Did you deliberately throw Mark out there and leave the issue open while you went back and filled in? How far ahead did you plan to write *Mirror Dance*?

LMB: Couple of weeks, as I recall. The first five chapters shot out in record time, and then things slowed up around real-life issues. I'll bet Pat Wrede still has letters I wrote about that time that would say more than I now can recollect.

Well, it was apparent at the end of *Brothers in Arms* that Mark would have to turn up again someday, but not how.

Jo: Do you deliberately put things in thinking that they'd make good hooks for future stories, and you'll write more about them some day, or do you just throw them in and then get more ideas about them later?

LMB: Most of them are not only not exploited till later, they're not even recognized till later. One of the several motives for writing stand-alones was that each volume could, potentially, be an end to the series; so I'd never find myself stuck partway through some multi-volume thing and running out of gas. This also became less of a concern later.

I observe that I do revisit themes for another pass, something that a series allows the writer to do that a single novel does not. Later books can actually critique earlier ones. And the second pass is often stronger. Such thematic pairs include *Shards of Honor* and *Barrayar*, *The Warrior's Apprentice* and *The Vor Game*, *Brothers in Arms* and *Mirror Dance*, *Komarr* and *A Civil Campaign*… *Memory* and everything that went before it.

Jo: Then from *Memory* on you have written in chronological order. Was there a reason for the change?

LMB: *Komarr* and *A Civil Campaign* followed as a pair; the drama half and the comedy half of Miles's courtship. *ACC* was a writer-treat to myself; I'd been longing to write a Barrayaran Regency romance ever since I realized Barrayar had undergone a regency period all its own. True, the regency was over and done with by the time the tale arrived, but the principle of the thing remained. It was also a response to the most frequently asked (and asked, and asked) fannish question of the era, "When is Miles going to get married?"

Diplomatic Immunity was written to fulfill an option for Baen acquired during the *Chalion* auction. By this time my Baen contracts were pretty much for whatever I wanted to write, and that was the story I thought of.

Jo: Are there any more bits out of chronological order you may go back and
fill in?

LMB: I don't know. As you doubtless realize from the above, I don't have a grand over-arching scheme for this series, except a vague model from the old Hornblower books of independent adventures following the main character's biography, but even that is up for grabs or change due to the writer having a better idea. Or not being able to have a better idea, as the case may be.

Jo: Do you ever think in terms of ending the series, or do you think it's something you may be writing more of at intervals forever? Do you think about the shape of the whole thing?

LMB: Properly, it should have ended at the end of *A Civil Campaign*– all comedies are supposed to end in weddings, Shakespeareanly, and the stories are ultimately comedies in the broadest sense, life-affirming. But I was weak, alas, and three times have been suckered into going on. Codicils, all codicils now. Unless they suddenly turn into crocodiles, not ruled out.

I've felt for years that Miles dies at age 57, but I don't know how, where, or why. I don't generally mention this to people, because I don't want to argue about it.

Jo: You mentioned resisting Jim Baen trying to persuade you to take it in certain directions, how hard was that? You clearly kept control of it

and took it in several unexpected directions, did you have support with that, or was it a struggle?

LMB: Well, I would have been stupid not to at least have listened to the man. He gave me lots of good editorial direction as well, after all.

One of his (or Toni's, I disremember) better bits of pump-priming was to send me a copy of B.H. Liddell Hart's *Strategy* back when I was booting up *The Vor Game*. One of his more plaintive protests was when I made Mark fat in *Mirror Dance*–"Can't you," Jim said, "make him muscular instead? Sort of V-shaped, maybe?" No. On the other flipper, when I mentioned, apprehensively, that the book was going to top 167,000 words, which I thought was going to be too large and expensive to print (and dreading being asked to cut anything) he replied firmly, "We'll find the paper somewhere."

I wish *MD* had sold better in its debut and paperback debut. Although that wasn't as embarrassing as the returns on my first hardcover, *The Spirit Ring*, 37% sell-though, ow, ow! Which Baen manfully ate. The book did earn out eventually. It can be discouraging to write evergreens in a market set up to reward bestsellers.

I believe it was Toni's complaint about the start of *ACC* not being SF-nal enough that was answered, unexpectedly to her, by the insertion of butterbugs.

Remember, in those pre-internet days, author-editor communication was much slower and more sporadic. I could pretty much deduce, however, what sort of books Jim's heart favored by seeing what else (mostly mil SF by people who wrote very fast) he was buying and heavily promoting. I kind of absorbed the idea that he did not love Mark (an admittedly difficult character, if close to my heart) and lived in dread of being handed a sequel to *Ethan of Athos.* I still remember the very nonplussed look he got on his face when I proposed *Barrayar* to him over dinner at PhilCon in '89, a sequel to my then-least-selling book. *A Civil Campaign* went down much better than I'd expected, though–I think it was the dinner party got him.

But he started leaving me alone to do what I did pretty early on. (I had, after all, written the first three books in editorial isolation, and the fourth won a Nebula.) That second three-book contract didn't even care what the books were to be, for example. The one-word outline entry ("Quaddies," a dimly imagined *Falling Free* sequel) became *The Vor Game*, and so on, as I discovered I could swap ideas around and Baen would still be happy as long as I handed in something publishable.

You have to remember, I was very naïve about the business of editing and publishing when I started out.

Not that Jim didn't make hopeful suggestions, from time to time, for all the good it did him.

Something Jim did early on, and which I ducked by sheer angel-of-luck, was offer me some sharecropping exercises as the junior writer, a ploy he undertook many times later (and apparently quite successfully, too) to help his new writers beat the sales computers. In each of the first two cases, the books I wrote instead won major awards, which was a lesson to me. The next time around, the offer was to sharecrop my own universe, which I also turned down. It wasn't something that I could see being made to fit my creative process in any way that wasn't excruciatingly painful.

Jo: You're very active in online discussions of your work, is fan pressure ever a problem?

LMB: Yes, no, sometimes, often. I don't have to go look, after all, so most of my wounds are self-inflicted. One of the things a writer hopes to do, however, is surprise readers, each new book to be like handing over a wrapped gift. While it was easy to imagine myself doing that back in the early days, when I had no feedback to speak of, now that lots of people are speculating about the series, it's harder to come up with an idea that no one else (whom I have seen) has thought of first. At one point, for example, I'd thought of gifting Ivan with a haut lady and seeing what happened, but after the fifth or sixth unsolicited e-mail arrived in my in-box suggesting just that, it killed the idea pretty dead. It's the reverse of your hooks question, above; I planted some set-up that I now don't plan to use, because I couldn't beat the mob to it.

I was more than a little horrified, when I opened up my *Science Fiction Book Club* flyer the other day and found a half-page ad for *Cordelia's Honor* (good), to find this cheerful note at the bottom saying, "While you're waiting for the new Miles novel, catch up on the series with *Cordelia's Honor.*" Given that I am, for various unavoidable reasons, already months past deadline and mired in the miserable middle, and still don't have a *title*, it made me feel as if I was typing in a big turtle tank, with thousands of faces pressed to the windows all around. Tapping on the glass. Agh!

A little over-sensitive at the moment, no doubt. I trust I'll feel better with some more chapters behind me.

I notice above that you ask a lot of questions about creativity that I answer with remarks on commerce. Partly that's just me being ornery, but mostly because it's really hard to describe the creative process in a way that doesn't sound demented. I have sometimes wondered if writing novels isn't some sort of dissociative disorder, and if only we could all have the right meds and upbringings, we'd stop. Publishers package and sell dreams… sounds like something out of a

fairy tale, right enough. (There's even fairy gold, urk.) Explains a lot about this business…

More Bujold essays and interviews may be found on www.dendarii.com

http://www.dendarii.com/essays.html

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